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America: Built Upon Racist Values

Since the beginning of the colonization of America, there have been various equality issues surrounding race beginning with the import of slaves for free labor. In 1865, the thirteenth amendment passed stating that slavery in America was illegal. However, it wasn’t until over 100 years later in 1968 during the civil rights movement that African-Americans were given the same rights as white citizens. Although multiple antiracism programs have been initiated by the government and touted to have great success since that time, the US government continues to facilitate racism within America, as evidenced by the history of inequality in the distribution of housing loans to black families, altering welfare guidelines to the detriment to black families, and the continuing inequality throughout employment and educational standards for black families in modern times. In today’s society, the government appears to be giving aid to a needy section of the population but in actuality is enabling an entire class of people to remain in poverty.

Jennifer S. Light, in her article “Nationality and Neighborhood Risk at the Origins of FHA Underwriting,” finds a strong relationship between appraisers valuing properties owned by whites over black citizens (Light 634). The nicer, more coveted neighborhoods that are not intermingled with industrial districts and that were populated by whites are deemed a “low risk” mortgage investment by raters (Light 642). Conversely, those homes or apartments in the city mixed with the industrial districts and populated by blacks were considered “high risk” for a mortgage investment and considered an unfavorable location for habitation (Light 647). These homes are frequently inhabited by black families, recent immigrants, and other members of the population that are viewed as “undesirable” (Light 649).

Light’s research primarily focuses on the racial prejudice by the public and private sector appraisers of Chicago in the 1930s and 40s. However, this issue is still ongoing today. William J. Bynum writes in his article, “Overcoming Poverty, Racism, and Inequality through Asset Accumulation,” that blacks have been denied property and assets promised to them since the Civil War ended (Bynum 34). According to Bynum, even after the government has passed “powerful laws” such as the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, and the Community Reinvestment Act, there’s still an extraordinary amount of evidence that racial discrimination in mortgage lending continues (Bynum 34). Bynum also states that owning assets is essential to how a person conducts their lives and that by owning assets, a person can provide a range of benefits that income or employment alone cannot (Bynum 35). By denying blacks the same opportunities afforded to whites, the government has stunted the growth of an entire race of people within the country. Due to inequality in home ownership and lack of assets to put up for lending purposes, Blacks have been forced to live in poverty across the nation and then blamed for utilizing government resources by their fellow Americans.

Herbert J. Gans states that there are multiple misconceptions about black poverty (Gans 461). Gans observes that the government has done its part to cut short the reaches of welfare to the black community by increasingly restricting their access, creating more opportunities for middle class families instead of those in who suffer from true poverty (Gans 458). Gans goes into depth about how there is a class of people deemed the “undeserving poor” (Gans 458). Perversely, those people are also the ones who rely on welfare and public assistance to assist them in daily life. Gans states that “now, more than ever, once a person becomes poor, it’s harder than ever to escape poverty” (Gans 458). In the novel, “Blame Welfare: Ignore Poverty and Inequality,” co-authored by Joel F. Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld, the welfare system is revealed to be initiated as a “white-only” federal program called the “New Deal” to give assistance specifically to white widows (Handler and Hasenfeld 2). This program stayed in effect until the 1950s and 60s when the “characteristics of families changed to include disproportionately unwed single black mothers” and is slated to be the beginning of the welfare “crisis” (Handler and Hasenfeld 2). Handler and Hasenfeld lay out the media and national stereotype of the “Welfare Queen,” referring to the young unwed black mother who has children specifically to remain on welfare (Handler and Hasenfeld 2). Handler and Hasenfeld pose the point that by demonizing welfare, the country is allowed to ignore the “economic and social conditions that produce poverty and inequality” in the first place (Handler and Hasenfeld 3). The point being that it’s easier to pay people to be on welfare than reform those who receive it to maintain the feeling of moral superiority by the majority of society and it’s more comfortable to blame the victim than accept responsibility for why an entire section of the population live a certain way (Handler and Hasenfeld 4)(Gans 459). Seemingly, the only way for black citizens to come off of welfare and get into better homes is to get higher paying jobs and a college education. Therein lies a larger problem. That system also seems to be broken and disparaging.

Herbert J. Gans relates that frequently, black job-seekers are placed on the same level as recent immigrants in an attempt to force them to accept “subminimum wages, long hours, poor working conditions, and employer intimidation” (Gans 461). Gans relates the scarcity of work for the poor, stating that the majority of America thinks there are always more jobs than workers and if someone would just “look hard enough,” they could find work (Gans 461). Contrary to this common belief, Gans relates that the “decent” jobs that are open to the poor, particularly to blacks, were the first to go away when deindustrialization began (Gans 461). Blacks are also then blamed when they lack “immigrant work ethic,” and given the stigma that they are lazy or don’t wish to work unlike their white counterparts (Gans 461). Conversely, in “Middle of the Class” by the Economist, the article states that in America, nearly 80% of the population thinks that it is possible to “start out poor, work hard, and become rich” (Economist 483). Although, according to the Economist, the gap between the rich and the poor is getting harder to bridge since the 1970’S (Economist 483). Jobs are becoming increasingly difficult to advance in due to the influx of people obtaining higher education and maintaining positions at higher level causing a shift in employment opportunities. The Economist states that this is squeezing the middle class and eventually causing America to be divided into two groups, the “haves and have-nots” (Economist 484). The children of wealthier families are able to go to college and obtain degrees, whereas children from poorer families cannot afford to go and maintain college enrollment. According to the Economist, this results in the staggering 6:1 ratio of wealthy students vs. poor students leaving college with a bachelor’s degree (Economist 485). Autry B. George, in his article “Education: The South’s Cure for Racism and Poverty,” agrees that it’s the black women who have it the worst when it comes to finding a decent paying job, stating that it’s most likely because they are poor, single-mothers and undereducated (George 86). George also relates this to why most poor black families have “persistent economic isolation” and struggle (George 86). The question most often asked is why black children aren’t doing as well in school as white children and many people attempt to balance home life as well as the financial aspects of it, but what about the education they received before college? Could it be that they aren’t prepared well enough?

Brink Lindsey, in the article “Culture of Success,” attempts to figure out the inequalities between upper and middle class families for education and development of their children. Lindsey’s research shows that 80% of children from top income families enroll in college the fall after graduating high school, whereas only 49% of children of lower income families do (Lindsey 453). Lindsey states that the rate of educational success a child has directly correlates to their specific families’ socioeconomic status, explaining that either the wealthier families invest more money in their children’s academic success or their parents have less stress due to having better, higher paying jobs (Lindsey 454). Lindsey states that these wealthier parents will push their children to study and reward them for getting good grades; therefore the child will develop good study habits that will help them succeed in college and beyond (Lindsey 454). On the contrary, children from poor families often live in low-income neighborhoods and attend schools that are underfunded thus inevitably offering a sub-par education (Lindsey 454). The poorer families have parents who work long hours and often do not have much interaction with their children (Lindsey 455). Lindsey references a study on vocabulary development in three year old children of “professional”, “working-class”, and “welfare” parents (Lindsey 455). The findings state that the children of “professional” parents had an average vocabulary of 1,116 words, with the working-class children averaging 749 and welfare children averaging 525 (Lindsey 455). This leaves someone to wonder how will these children grow up to get ahead in life if they’ve already started halfway behind

The amount of injustice done to the African-Americans within this country since its formation will take decades to reverse and will only begin to right itself once this country and the government acknowledge that there is still a problem with racial equality. Rosa Parks, an African-American civil rights activist famous for not giving up her bus seat for a white passenger, said at a celebration of her life in 1998 at Howard University, “Racism is still with us. But it is up to us to prepare our children for what they have to meet, and, hopefully, we shall overcome.” Every citizen in America deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of race. There will not be any further advancement of this country until there is a definitive change within the elaborate structured system that this government has created.

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